

Christopher McMahan, LAT, works as a full-time athletic trainer at DeSoto Middle School. He was one of three athletic trainers hired by the DeSoto Independent School District in the fall of 2016 to care for the district's middle school athletes.



HOW DESOTO ISD EXPANDED ITS ATHLETIC TRAINING SERVICES TO MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Communication, professionalism helped ATs build trust in their community, experience growth

By Beth Sitzler

As more attention is brought to youth sports safety, more athletic trainers are advocating for athletic training services beyond the high school level, into the middle schools. The athletic training department of the DeSoto Independent School District in DeSoto, Texas, has done just that, growing its program from two ATs to seven, allowing for the full-time care of middle school athletes.

When Scott Galloway, MBA, LAT, ATC, DeSoto ISD head athletic trainer, started working at DeSoto High School in 1999, he was one of two athletic trainers on staff. Faced with a large campus and a growing student

population, the DeSoto High School athletic trainers couldn't be at every sporting event or practice, resulting in gaps in care. Rather than "just making it work," Galloway used it as an opportunity to show key stakeholders the need for more ATs.

"If you do everything, there is never a reason to make improvements. There is an assumption that everything is OK and that the standards are being met," Galloway said. "By not having adequate coverage for all of our home sporting events, we were able to justify the additional third athletic trainer to help us provide quality care on site, at least event coverage."

A third athletic trainer was hired in 2004 to help fill the gaps at the high school level. A few years later, Galloway began looking at the school district's middle schools.

Larry Davis, DeSoto ISD athletic director, said over the past five to seven years, the school district has expanded its middle school athletic offerings to include not only traditional sports, such as football, basketball, track and volleyball, but also cross-country, boys' and girls' tennis and soccer.

"We added a fourth athletic trainer [in 2007] by saying, 'Hey, these middle school students deserve some type of coverage, at least at their contact sports, like football,'" Galloway said.

Because of the addition of middle school soccer last year—“a massive hit with students,” Davis said—and the strict state regulations related to sports safety, Galloway began advocating for additional athletic trainers to provide full-time care to all middle school athletes.

“I met with every single principal, I met with every campus coordinator who was a coach at that level and started to get buy-in from each of those individuals. So when it came time for the ask, it wasn’t just me asking—it was all of us,” he said.

Thanks to the buy-in from various stakeholders, the budget proposal for additional athletic trainers was adopted by the school board. In the fall of 2016, DeSoto ISD welcomed three more athletic trainers, each of whom was placed at one of the school district’s middle schools.

“This school year is the first school year that we decided, with the support of our superintendent and our school board, that the level of care the athletic trainers were providing to our middle school kids needed to be stepped up,” Davis said. “What I’m doing as an athletic director is I’m creating more activities for middle school kids to participate in, and with that philosophy in mind, we really needed to make sure the kids’ level of care increased also.”

With three middle schools that feed into one high school, the seven DeSoto ISD athletic trainers care for approximately 2,000 student athletes grades seventh through 12th—about 1,000 at the high school level alone—during every home game and practice.

“For me, it boils down to the ratio of student athletes and athletic trainers. It doesn’t make sense to have one athletic trainer for 400 kids,” Galloway said. “One of the first questions administrators ask is, ‘Well, who else is doing it?’ Everybody wants to know who else has programs like this. That can be a tough sell when you’re trying to be on the front side of change and not be reactionary, but visionary. Those were tough conversations to say, ‘Well nobody is really doing this, but somebody needs to be doing this.’”

A big reason DeSoto ISD’s athletic training department has been able to grow in the way it has, Galloway said, is because of the support it has received.

Todd Peterman, DeSoto High School head football coach, said he and Galloway work hand-in-hand on everything from helmet selection to the use of movement analysis software. This is thanks to a relationship built on trust and communication.

“I have full confidence in our athletic training staff, and our [other] coaches are the same way,” he said. “We have an open line of communication where we know exactly what’s going on with the kids. We know what kids are coming in for treatment, what kids aren’t, what the injuries are, what we can do to help facilitate recovery be it nutrition, hydration, those things that coaches can help with. Our guys do a good job of letting us know that.”

Peterman said trust built between coaches and athletic trainers is important because it will trickle down to parents and athletes.

“How your coaches are talking about the athletic trainers to the parents and the kids is extremely important,” he said. “We don’t have to exaggerate—we believe we have the best athletic training staff in the nation and our kids believe that.”

“Athletic trainers have to get the coaches to buy what they’re doing. Once that happens that will turn over to the parents and the student athletes, as well as the school administrations. It will filter out to everybody.”

Davis said administrators also need to trust their athletic trainers do their jobs.

“You have to give [athletic trainers] the full respect that profession deserves—that when a kid is injured and we need to hold that kid out, there isn’t any second guessing,” he said. “We’re going to value the kids’ health over wins and losses—period, end of statement. Our staff here in DeSoto has completely bought into that. They understand that when an athletic trainer says this kid needs to stay out a day or two, it is what it is and our coaches truly respect that. It ends up being a tremendous working relationship between both groups.”

Galloway said professionalism is of the utmost importance to him and his staff.

“[You have to] make sure that when the lights come on and the decision-makers are around that they are fully aware that the athletic trainer is a vital piece of the overall fabric of the school, and really the community for that matter,” he



The athletic trainers with DeSoto ISD have been able to show a need for care and have grown the department from two ATs to seven thanks to support from coaches, parents, school administrators and the community at large.

said. “We try to be visible at all events and treat every kid as if they’re our own.”

By being their own advocates and shining a positive light on the profession whenever possible, the athletic trainers of DeSoto ISD have been able to show their value to school administrators, parents, athletes and the entire DeSoto community.

“The more exposure people get to what you’re doing, subconsciously they attribute value to it,” Galloway said. “Our superintendent and [Peterman] spoke at the Rotary Club function and [the athletic training department] was brought up. People have taken notice because athletics is important to this community, but what we’re learning is their children’s health is more important. Knowing that there is a professional on their campus looking out for the best interest of the student athlete has really put parents’ minds at ease. What we have found is that parents really need that help and guidance. People, at least here, want

Photo by Renee Fernandes/NATA

to see the athletic trainer. They want the guidance and opinion of the athletic trainer.”

Since being hired, the three middle school athletic trainers have become part of the fabric of their schools by participating in mentoring groups and even lending a hand with lunchtime supervision.

“This shows they can integrate into the campus,” said Galloway, adding that the new athletic trainers have also exposed younger students to the profession. “Our middle schools are developing [athletic training] programs. Each has their little group of students, which is neat. ... It introduces them

have to be willing to ask the question,” he said. “You have to be willing to present it in multiple ways. You have to be willing to not take ‘no’ as an answer. ‘No’ just means ‘OK, let’s find another way and present this in another way to change your mind.’”

“With any successful program the leadership of that program is what drives it,” Davis said. “We’re blessed to have, over the years, some really strong leadership of people with a lot of vision. From there we just have to sit down and see what’s feasible, what’s realistic and then, above all, what is totally necessary.”

Often times cost can be a deterrent for school districts to increase athletic training staff. Galloway said the value of the athletic trainer must outweigh the cost. One way he showed value was by detailing the responsibilities the additional athletic trainers would take on outside of the athletic training facility and sports arena, such as weather monitoring, working with the school’s principal on health and safety issues on campus and collaborating with campus staff on employee wellness initiatives.

“If you can prove that the athletic trainer touches all of these different aspects of the school environment and community, it’s hard for anybody to say ‘no’ to that,” he said. “It can’t just be about football or, really, it can’t just be about the student athlete. It has to be about the school and community as a whole.”

Also, athletic trainers shouldn’t limit how they go about receiving funding.

“There is more than one way to do it,” Galloway said. “It’s great that these [new AT positions] are all fully funded by the school district, but you know hospitals are looking to expand. Some schools may just not have the resources to do that, so OK, what if they could just cover part of the need? Doing something is always better than nothing—but don’t stop there. You have to constantly be an advocate for change.”

Galloway encourages athletic trainers to reach out to other programs that have had success in expanding to gain insight into how they did it.

“Don’t be afraid to call on your peers who have done it. Don’t go into this fight by yourself,” he said. “One of the things that excites me about this is that I’ve already been able to have contact with other professionals around the country who say, ‘Hey, how are you doing that? Can you help us do that?’”

Davis said DeSoto ISD will open its doors to anyone who would like to visit and see firsthand how its athletic training department operates.

“We’re ready,” he said. “We truly invite people to come in and visit us and see what we’re doing.”



Photo by Renee Fematides / NATA

Scott Galloway, MBA, LAT, ATC, head athletic trainer at DeSoto ISD, provides care to a student athlete before football practice. Galloway said he constantly advocates for his ATs to ensure students receive the best care possible.

to a potential career path that they could one day fall into, and that’s something we’ve always been passionate about over here.”

Being their own advocate is important for all athletic trainers. Galloway said all they need is a starting point and a willingness to try and try again.

“Not every place is going to be receptive, not everybody is going to understand, so you

The justification for added athletic training staff needs to be apparent, and may require doing some homework.

“You’ve got to have a strong justification as to why you’re doing it,” Davis said. “Our justification was our numbers. Our athletic program is growing by leaps and bounds, and with more kids is more opportunity for injury.”